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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004973

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SUBJECT: KAMIRAN KARADAGHI ON "IRAQI IDENTITY," CABINET JOCKEYING

REF: REF: BAGHDAD 4808

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT S. FORD FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: President Talabani's Chief of Staff and former journalist Kamiran Karadaghi told us on December 12 that there was no such thing as an "Iraqi identity." Rather, people still identified themselves primarily in sectarian terms. The Sunni Arabs were so fragmented, Karadaghi said, that if Saddam Husayn ran in the election today he would garner at least one million votes. Moving on to post-election Cabinet reshuffling, Karadaghi stated that, in his opinion, the most qualified candidate to be Prime Minister is Ahmad Chalabi. Dismissing concerns about Chalabi's actions as chair of the de-Baathification committee, he laughed and told PolOffs that "you will have to get over your personal problems with Chalabi, because he is the most efficient and capable person to run things." He also claimed that former Prime Minister Allawi would be the worst choice. While Karadaghi supports Chalabi for Prime Minister, he noted that Talabani prefers 'Adel 'Abd al-Mahdi. The PUK leadership is split on this, with Talabani at odds with the rest of his senior leadership (who prefer Allawi). End Summary.

(U) There is no 'Iraqi' Identity

¶12. (C) During a meeting with President Talabani's Chief of Staff Kamiran Karadaghi on December 12, Karadaghi remarked that there was no such thing as an "Iraqi identity;" rather people still identified themselves primarily in sectarian terms. He repeated his example of the committee headed by Rowsh Shaways (KDP) to investigate recent allegations against the Interior Ministry for human rights violations (see reftel). For the next four years, Karadaghi predicts politics in Iraq will continue along these sectarian lines.

¶13. (C) Sunni Arabs were having a difficult time adjusting to the political realities of life after Saddam Hussain, according to Karadaghi. Sunni Arabs in the West were being supported by nations such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria. While other groups - Kurds, Turkmen, Shi'a - have forged their own ethnic or religious identity, the Sunni Arabs have only just started to figure it out, said Karadaghi. In response to PolOff's observation during her time in Kirkuk that the Sunni Arabs were running four separate lists, Karadaghi replied that that just went to show how fragmented the Sunni Arabs were. "If Saddam ran in the election today," Karadaghi proclaimed, "he would get at least one million votes, easily."

(U) Chalabi as Prime Minister?

¶14. (C) Moving on to post-election Cabinet reshuffling, Karadaghi stated that, in his opinion, the most qualified candidate to be Prime Minister is Ahmad Chalabi. Mischievously pointing his finger at PolOffs, he laughed and said "You will have to get over your personal problems with Chalabi, because he is the most efficient and capable person to run things." Karadaghi claimed that other ministers have told him privately that they look forward to the days when Chalabi is presiding over the cabinet meetings because he runs them so efficiently and all agenda items are effectively addressed. He also dismissed the notion that neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan oppose Chalabi. "Do you think we Iraqis really care what the neighbors say?" he asked. "We care only about what Iran think, and to a lesser extent, Turkey." Former Prime Minister and current candidate Ayad Allawi was the worst choice, he opined. "He looks the part of the competent minister, but in truth his tenure was the worst we have had."

¶15. (C) Karadaghi then brought up the issue of

corruption, claiming that only Chalabi was untouched by any accusations of wrongdoing, unlike Allawi. He brushed aside PolOff's mention of Chalabi's work on the De-Baathification Committee, stating that "this isn't really corruption - it's politics, and anyway you won't find a single Shi'a who has a problem with what he's done." (Comment: This is a reference to allegations of sectarian partisanship by the de-Baathification Commission (which is headed by Chalabi), whose list of names recommended for removal from the candidate roster only targets Sunni Arabs. The Embassy has brought up this problem with Chalabi and others in an ongoing attempt to ensure a fair and transparent election in December. End Comment.)

(U) A Trip to the Iraqi West Wing

¶ 16. (U) After the meeting with Karadaghi, PolOffs were treated to a tour of the administrative area of the Presidency Building which Talabani's media aide Hiwa Osman referred to as the "Iraqi West Wing." After quickly moving through the administrative, legal, and protocol offices, Osman ushered PolOffs into the Media Center, where Iraqi journalists monitored the news. Osman proudly displayed the Iraqi Presidency website, accessible in both Arabic and Kurdish, and stated that the English language page would be online soon. He specifically pointed out the photos page, with a large picture of Talabani during his hajj. He is pictured with his bodyguard, who had chosen to drape his white cloth in the Sunni fashion, baring one arm. According to Osman, Talabani then chose to wear his in the Shi'a fashion, to present an image of religious plurality.

(U) Comment

¶ 17. (C) While Karadaghi supports Chalabi for Prime Minister, he noted that Talabani prefers 'Adel 'Abd al-Mahdi. The PUK leadership is split on this, with Talabani at odds with the rest of his senior leadership (who prefer Allawi).
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